

Sophy of Kravonia

by ANTHONY HOPE

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"Sergius Stefanovitch—Nikolas Stafnits! Which was it, general? It's only changing two words, yet what a difference it makes!"

"The difference of peace tonight or?" Stenovic waved his hand toward the city. But the prince interrupted him.

"He looked full at Stenovic, and the general's eyes fell. The prince pointed his finger across the table at the paper under Stenovic's hand."

"I'm a liberal bargainer," he said, "and I offer you a good margin of profit. I'll change two words if you'll change one—two for you against one for me! 'Sergius Stefanovitch' becomes 'Nikolas Stafnits' if 'Impossible' becomes 'Immediate'."

Stenovic gave one slight start, then leaned back in his chair and looked past the prince out of the window opposite to him.

"Make that change, and we'll settle details afterward. I must see the order sent and the money deposited in my name and at my disposal."

"This afternoon, sir?"

"Wouldn't it be well to release Captain Mistitch from Suleiman's tower before tonight?"

"The money is difficult today."

"The release will be impossible tomorrow."

Again Stenovic's eyes wandered to the window, and a silence followed. Perhaps he saw the big guns already in position, dominating the city. Perhaps he listened to the hum of voices which again began to swell in volume from the wall and from the quays. There are times when a man must buy the present with a mortgage on the future, however onerous the terms may be. It was danger against destruction. He put out his hand and took from Zerkovitch a quill which the journalist was twiddling in his fingers. He made a scratch and a scribble on the paper which the prince had taken from the envelope.

"Impossible" has become "Immediate," sir.

"And 'Sergius Stefanovitch' 'Nikolas Stafnits,'" said the prince. He looked at Sophy for confirmation, and she softly clasped her hands.



Chapter Sixteen

THE troops of the garrison and their allies, the scum of the streets, thought that they had scored a great victory and inflicted deep humiliation on the unpopular martinet who ruled and harried them. They celebrated the event with noisy but harmless revels, and when Captain Hercules was seen about again—he submitted to a fortnight's confinement to barracks with feelings in which thankfulness, though not gratitude, predominated—he found his popularity with them greater than ever. But in the higher circles—the inner ring—of the party he served his reception was not so cordial. Stenovic would not see him. Stafnits saw him only to express a most uncompromising judgment on his conduct.

Yielding in appearance, in point of substance the Prince of Slavna had scored heavily. The big guns were ordered from Germany. The prince had the money to pay for them, and they were to be consigned to him. These were the guarantees which he had asked from Stenovic. When the guns came—and he had agreed to make an extra payment for early delivery—his situation would be very different. With trusty men behind them it would go hard with him if he were not master of Slavna, and he had already obtained the king's sanction to raise and train a force of artillery from among his own men in Volseni and its neighborhood. The men of Volseni were proof against Mistitch's bragging and the subtle indulgence by which Stafnits held his power over the rank and file of the army. They were true to the prince.

The idle king's family pride was touched. It was the one thing which could rouse him. At his son's express request, and at that only, he acquiesced in the release of Mistitch and his satellite Sterkoff, but he was determined to make his own attitude clear and to do what he could to restore the prestige of his family. The prince said dryly that the prestige would profit best of all by the big guns. The king was minded to supplement their effect by something more ornate. He created a new order and made his son grand master of it. There was no harm in that, and Ste-

novic readily consented. He declared that something more must be done for the lady to whom his son owed his life. To be made keeper of the tapestries might be a convenient recompense, but was not honor enough. Stenovic declared that any mark of favor which his majesty designed for Mlle de Gruche might properly be hers. Finally the king instructed Stenovic to concentrate all his energies on the matrimonial negotiations. A splendid marriage for Sergius with a German princess would enhance and strengthen the prestige more than anything else. Stenovic promised zealous obedience and withdrew full of thought. The order was an easy matter, and honors for Sophy did no harm. The marriage was ground much more delicate. It touched the "big stake" which Colonel Stafnits had so emphatically warned the general not to play on the bad hand dealt to him by Mistitch's blundering. But, with the big guns in position and the sturdy men of Volseni behind them, would a good hand ever come?

There were but three in the inner secret of the scheme, but they were three of the longest heads in Kravonia. Countess Ellenburg was a pious woman and of exemplary demeanor; but, as Markart told Sophy, women are ambitious, and she had borne the king a son. Stenovic saw himself cast aside like an old glove if Prince Sergius came to the throne. Stafnits was a born fisher in troubled waters and threw a skillful net. Twice before in the country's history intrigue had made revolution and changed the order of succession in the house of Stefanovitch. The three waited on chance, but the chance was not yet. If the king were at enmity with his son or if there was a demise of the crown while the prince was not on the spot to look after his interests, there might lie the opportunity. But now the king was all cordiality for his heir apparent; the prince was on the spot; the guns and their Volsenian gunners threatened to be on the spot, too, ere long. It was not now the moment for the big stake.

King Alexis was delighted with his new order, and the grand master's insignia were very handsome. In the center of a five-pointed star St. Michael slew the dragon—a symbol perhaps of Captain Mistitch! But the king had not done yet. There was honor for the prince's friends too. Men should know that service to the royal house was meritorious in proportion to the illustrious position of that house. Zerkovitch stood forward and was made chevalier of the Cross of Kravonia. The occasion cost Zerkovitch the price of a court suit, but for Marie's sake he bore the outlay patiently. Then the king, having refreshed himself with a draft which his valet Lepage brought him, turned to his most pleasing task. The keeper of the tapestries was called from her place in the circle beside Marie Zerkovitch. Colonel Stafnits had not noticed her standing there, but now he gave a little start. The figure seemed familiar. He turned his head round to Markart, who was just behind him. "Yes, that's her," Markart whispered in answer to the question in the colonel's eyes. The eyes flew back to Sophy instantly. There, too, was set the gaze of Countess Ellenburg, for Sophy was in full beauty that day. She, too, loved toys, and her ancient hatred of the name to which she had been born must be remembered. Her eyes glowed, and the red star glowed on her cheek. All her air was triumphant as she contrasted to the king and then stood erect and proud to hear his gracious words.

Gracious his words were for her deed and gracious his smile for her comely beauty. He could at least look a king in kindly phrases. "A service unmatched in courage and immeasurable in importance to us and our royal house, the preservation of our dearly loved son and only heir." Countess Ellenburg looked down her nose at that! For such an act did he confer a patent of nobility on Sophy and for greater honor or gave her as title the name of one of his own estates, together with a charge on its revenues equal to her new dignity.

He ended and sank back in his chair. Her prince came forward and kissed her hand before them all. Countess Ellenburg bowed condescendingly. A decorous murmur of applause filled the hall as, with shining eyes, Sophia, Baroness Dobrava, courted again very low.

So, as Sophy Grouch had gone, went Sophie de Gruche!

"She's delighted, poor child!" whispered Marie Zerkovitch, but only Julia Robins, in England, far away, heard the full torrent of Sophy's simple, childlike exultation. Such a letter went to her that night, but there was stuff in it besides the baroness's paeon.

Suddenly a childish voice rang out clear through the hall—a fearless, eager little voice.

"What's that you've got on

your prince came for your cheek?" said and kissed her hand.

giving candor. His finger pointed at Sophy's face.

So quaint an interruption to the stately formality of the scene struck people's sense of humor. Everybody laughed—even Countess Ellenburg. Sophy's own laugh rose rich and merry. Her ignorance or carelessness of etiquette betrayed itself. She darted at the pretty boy, caught him in her arms and kissed him, answering, "That's my luck—my red star."

The boy touched the mark with his finger. A look of childish awe came into his blue eyes.

"Your luck!" he said softly and continued to look at the mysterious sign after Sophy had set him down again. The little scene was told all over Slavna before night, and men and women talked, according to their temper, of the nature and the meaning of the red star. If only the foolish talk about such things, even the wise talk.

The king left his chair and mingled with his guests. His movement was the signal for a general relaxation of ceremony. The prince came across the room and joined Sophy, who had returned to Marie Zerkovitch's side. He offered the baroness his congratulations, but in somewhat constrained tones. His mind seemed to be on something else. Once or twice he looked inquiringly at Marie, who, in her turn, showed signs of restlessness or distraction. A silence followed on Sophy's expression of her acknowledgments. The prince glanced again at Marie and said to his mind to speak.

"You've done me the kindness I asked?" he inquired of Marie.

Marie picked at the feathers of her fan in unhappy embarrassment. "No, sir; I haven't. I—I couldn't."

"But why not?" he asked in surprise.

"I—I couldn't," repeated Marie, flushing.

He looked at her gravely for a moment, then smiled. "Then I must plead my own cause," he said and turned to Sophy. "Next week I'm leaving Slavna and going to my castle of Praslok. It's near Volseni, you know, and I want to raise and train my gunners at Volseni. We must be ready for our guns when they come, mustn't we?"

His eyes met hers, eager glance exchanged for glance as eager. "Our guns!" whispered Sophy under her breath.

"Marie here and Zerkovitch have promised to come with me. He'll write what ought to be written, and she'll cook the dinners," he laughed. "Oh well, we do live very simply at Praslok. We shall be there three months at least. I asked Marie to persuade you to come with her and to stay as long as you could, but she's disappointed me. I must plead for myself."

The changing expressions of Sophy's eyes had marked every sentence of his speech, and Marie marked every expression of the eyes. They had grown forlorn and apprehensive when he spoke of leaving Slavna. A sudden joy leaped into them at his invitation to Praslok.

"You'll come for a little? The scenery is very fine and the people interesting."

Sophy gave a low laugh. "Since the scenery is fine and the people interesting, yes, monseigneur."

Their eyes met again, and he echoed back her laugh. Marie Zerkovitch drew in her breath sharply. With swift insight she saw and foresaw. She remembered the presentiment under whose influence she had begged Sophy not to come to Kravonia. But fate had weighted the scales heavily against her. The Baroness Dobrava was here.

A simultaneous exclamation of many voices broke across their talk. At the other end of the room men and women pressed into a circle round some point of interest which could not be seen by Sophy and her companions. A loud voice rang out in authoritative tones: "Stand back! Stand back and open all the windows!"

"That's Natcheff's voice," said the prince. Natcheff was the leading physician of Slavna. "Somebody's fainting, I suppose. Well, the place is stuffy enough!"

Markart emerged from the circle, which had widened out in obedience to the physician's orders. As he hurried past the prince he said: "The king has fainted, sir. I'm going to fetch Lepage." Two or three other men ran to open the windows.

"The king fainted! I never knew him to do that before."

He hastened to where his father lay, the subject of Natcheff's ministrations. Sophy and Marie followed in his wake through the opening which the onlookers made for him. The king showed signs of recovering, but Natcheff's face was grave beyond even the requirements of his profession or of his patient's rank. The next moment Lepage came up. This man, the king's body servant, was a small, plump person, who had generally a weary, impassive, uninterested manner. He looked rather uninterested even now, but his walk was very quick, and he was soon aiding Natcheff with deft and nimble fingers.

"This is strange, Lepage," said Natcheff.

Lepage did not look up from his task. "Has it ever happened before?" Then Lepage did look up. He appeared to consider and to hesitate. He glanced once at the king before he an-

swered. "It's the third attack in two months," he said at last.

"You never told me!" The words shot sharp from Natcheff's lips.

"That was by his majesty's peremptory orders. He'll be angry that I've told you now."

"Clear the room!" ordered Natcheff shortly.

Slavna had plenty to talk about that night. Besides the Baroness Dobrava's red star there was the fainting fit of King Alexis! The evening bulletin was entirely favorable. The king had quite recovered. But many had heard Lepage's confession and seen the look that it brought to Natcheff's face.

Stenovic and Stafnits rode back from the palace to the city side by side. The general was silent, immersed in deep thought. Stafnits smoked his cigarette with a light, rather mocking smile. At last, when they were almost opposite the terrace of the Hotel de Paris, Stenovic spoke.

"It looks like the handwriting on the wall," he said.

"Quite so, general," Stafnits agreed cheerfully, "but at present there's no evidence to show to whom besides the king himself the message is addressed."

"Or what it says?"

"I think that's plain enough, general. I think it says that the time is short."

He watched his companion's face closely now, but Stenovic's mask was stolid and unmoved. He said nothing. He contented himself with a sullen grunt.

"Short for the king!" pursued Stafnits, with a shake of his head. "Short for the prince perhaps! And certainly, general, uncomfortably short for us!"

Stenovic grunted again and then rode on some while in silence. At last, just as he was about to part from his companion, he made one observation:

"Fortunately Natcheff is a friend of mine. We shall get the best possible information."

"That might become of importance, no doubt, general," said Stafnits, smiling still.



Chapter Seventeen

D R. NATCHEFF amply reassured public opinion. What information he gave to General Stenovic, his friend, is another matter and remained locked in that statesman's heart. Publicly and to everybody else from the Prince of Slavna downward he declared that there was no ground for apprehension and that the king merely needed rest and change. After a few days of the former it was proposed to seek the latter by moving the court to his majesty's country seat at Dobrava—that estate from which Sophy had been graciously bidden to choose her title. Meanwhile there was no reason why the prince should not carry out his intention and proceed to the castle of Praslok.

Below Slavna the main postroad—as has already been stated, there was no railway at this time—follows the course of the river Krath for about five miles in a southerly direction. It is then carried across the stream, which continues to trend to the south, by an ancient wooden bridge and runs northeast for another fifteen miles through flat country and past prosperous agricultural and pastoral villages till it reaches the marshy land bordering Lake Talti. The lake, extending from this point to the spurs of the mountain range which forms the frontier, bars its farther direct progress, and it divides into two branches. The right prong of the fork continues on the level till it reaches Dobrava, eight miles from the point of bisection. Here it inclines to the northeast again and, after some ten miles of steady ascent, crosses the mountains by St. Peter's pass, the one carriage road over the range and over the frontier. The left prong becomes a steep ascent directly the bisection has occurred, rising sharply for five miles to the hill on which the castle of Praslok stands. Then it runs for another five miles on a high plateau till it ends at the hill city of Volseni, which stands on the edge of the plateau, looking down on Lake Talti and across to Dobrava, in the plain opposite.

Beyond Volseni there is no road in the proper sense, but only cart or bridle tracks. Of these the principal and most frequented runs diagonally across the valley in which Lake Talti lies, is interrupted by the lake, at that point about a mile and a half wide, and then meets the road from Dobrava halfway up St. Peter's pass and about twenty miles across country from Volseni. It thus forms the base of a rough and irregular triangle of country, with the point where the Slavna road bisects the pass and Volseni marking its three angles. Lake Talti is set in the middle, backed by a chain of hills continuous everywhere except at the indentation of the pass.

Though so near to Slavna in actual distance, the country is very different from the fertile river valley which surrounds the capital. It is bleak and rough, a land of hill pastures and mountain woods. Its back-to-back-together natural features are reflected in the character of the inhabitants. The men who count Volseni a local capital are harder than the men of Slavna, less given to luxury, less addicted to quarrels and riots, but considerably more formidable opponents if once they take up arms. For this reason no less than on account of their devotion to him the prince did well to choose this country as the recruiting ground for his new force of gunners.

The prince had been at Praslok for a week when Sophy set out to join him there. At the last moment Zerkovitch decided to remain in Slavna, at least until the court made its promised move to Dobrava. Reassuring as Dr. Natcheff was, it would do no harm to have a friendly pair of eyes and ears in the capital so long as the king remained in residence. Thus the two ladies were accompanied only by Peter Vassip, whom the prince had sent to escort them. They set out in a heavy traveling carriage at 10 in the morning, reckoning to reach the castle before evening fell. Their progress would never be rapid and for the last five miles exceedingly slow. They left the capital in complete tranquillity, and when Sophy settled her bill at the sign of the Silver Cock and bade farewell to old Meyerstein, her landlord, he expressed the hope that she would soon be back, though, indeed, his poor house was, he feared, no fit quarters for the Baroness Dobrava.

"I don't know whether I shall come back here, but I can never forget your house. I shall always love it in my memory," said Sophy.

Max von Hollbrandt had obtained leave of absence from his legation and had accompanied the prince to Praslok. The two were friends, having many tastes in common and, not least, the taste for soldiering. Besides having the pleasure of his company the prince looked to obtain valuable aid from Max in the task on which he was engaged. The young German was amused and delighted with his expedition. Praslok is a primitive old place. It stands on an abrupt mound or knob of ground by the roadside. So steep and sudden is the ascent that it was necessary to build a massive causeway of wood—an inclined plane—to lead up from the road to the gate of the square tower which forms the front of the building. The causeway has crossbars at short intervals to give foothold to the horses which in old days were stabled within the walls. Recently, however, modern stables had been built on the other side of the road, and it had become the custom to mount the causeway and enter the castle on foot.

Within, the arrangements were quaint and very simple. Besides the tower already mentioned, which contained the dining room and two bedrooms above it, the whole building, strictly conditioned by the shape of the hill on which it stood, consisted of three rows of small rooms on the ground floor. In one row lived the prince and his male guests, in the second the servants, in the third the guard. The ladies were to be accommodated in the tower above the dining room. The rows of rooms opened on a covered walk, or cloister, which ran round the inner court of the castle. The whole was solidly built of gray stone—a businesslike old hill fortress, strong by reason of its massive masonry and of the position in which it stood. Considered as a modern residence it had to be treated humorously, so Max declared, and found much pleasure in it from that point of view. The prince, always indifferent to physical comfort and ever averse from luxury, probably did not realize how much his ancestral stronghold demanded of his guests' indulgence. Old Vassip, Peter's father, was major domo—always in his sheepskin coat and high boots. His old wife was cook. Half a dozen servants completed the establishment, and of these three were grooms. The horses, in fact, seemed to Max the only creatures whose comfort were at all on a modern footing. But the prince was entirely satisfied and never so happy anywhere as at Praslok. He loved the simple, hardy life. He loved even more, though perhaps less consciously, the sense of being among friends. He would not yield an inch to court popularity in Slavna, but his heart went out to meet the unsought devotion of Volseni, the mountain town, and its surrounding villages. Distant and self-restrained in Slavna, here he was open, gay and full of an almost boyish ardor.

"It's worth coming here just to see its effect on you," Max told him as the two rode back together from Volseni on the day of Sophy's arrival. They had been at work, and the recruiting promised well.

The prince laughed gayly. "Coming here from Slavna is like fresh air after an oven," he said. "No need to watch your tongue or other people's! You can laugh when you like and frown when you like without a dozen people asking what's your motive for doing it."

"But really you shouldn't have chosen a diplomatist for your companion, sir, if you feel like that."

"I haven't," he smiled. "I've left the diplomatist down there and brought the soldier up. And now that the ladies are coming—"

"Ah, now we must watch our tongues a little bit! Mme. Zerkovitch is very pretty, and the baroness might make me absolutely poetical!"

Least prying of men, yet Max von Hollbrandt could not resist sending with this speech a glance at his companion. The visit of the baroness compelled this much tribute to curiosity. But the prince's face was a picture of unembarrassed pleasure.

"Then be poetical! We'll all be poetical!" he cried merrily. "In the intervals of drilling be it understood!" he added, with a laugh.

Into this atmosphere, physical and moral—the exhilaration of keen moun-

tain breezes, the brightness of a winter sun, the play of high hopes and of high spirit—came Sophy, with all her power of enjoying and her ardor in imagining. Her mind leaped from the sad embraces of the past to fly to the arms of the present, to beckon gladly to the future. No more than this had yet emerged into consciousness. She was not yet asking how for good or evil she stood or was to stand toward the prince. Fortune had done wonderful things for her and was doing more yet. That was enough, and beyond that for the moment she was not driven.

The mixture of poetry and drilling suited her to perfection. She got both when she rode over to Volseni with the prince. Crisp snow covered the ground and covered, too, the roofs of the old gray, hillside city—long, sloping roofs, with here and there a round tower with a snow clad extinguisher atop. The town was no more than one long street, which bayed out at the farther end into a market place. It stood with its back against a mountain side, defended on the other three sides by a sturdy wall, which only now, after five centuries, began to crumble away at the top.

At the city gate bread and salt were brought to the bailiff and his companion, and she and he rode side by side down the long street to the market place. Here were two or three hundred tall, fine fellows waiting their leader. Drill had not yet brought formality. On the sight of him they gave a cheer and ran to form a ring about him. Many caught him by the hand and pressed or kissed it. But Sophy, too, claimed their eyes. It was very cold. She wore a short jacket of sable over her habit and a round cap of the same fur, gifts of Lady Meg's in the days of her benevolence. She was at the pitch of pleasure and excitement.

In a moment a quick witted fellow divined who she was. "The lady who saved him! The lady who saved him!" he cried at the full pitch of his voice. The prince drew himself up in the saddle and saluted her. "Yes, the lady who saved me," he said. Sophy had the cheers now, and they mounted to her head with fumes of intoxication. It may be guessed how the red star glowed!

"And you'll save him if need be!" she cried quite indiscreetly. The prince smiled and shook his head, but the answer was an enraptured cheer. The hatred of Slavna was a recommendation to Volseni's increased regard, the hint of danger a match to its fiery enthusiasm.

"A favor, bailiff, a favor!" cried a young man of distinguished appearance. He seemed to be well known and to carry weight, for there were shouts of "Hear Lukovitch! Hear Lukovitch!" and one called, with a laugh, "Aye, listen to the Wolf!"

"What is it, Lukovitch?" asked the prince.

"Make the lady of our company, bailiff." New cheers were raised. "Make her a lieutenant of our artillery!"

Sophy laughed gayly. "I have his majesty's authority to choose my officers," said the prince, smiling. "Baroness, will you be a lieutenant and wear our sheepskins in place of your sables there?"

"It is your uniform, monseigneur," Sophy answered, bowing her head.

Lukovitch sprang forward and kissed her hand.

"For our bailiff's preserver as for our bailiff, men of Volseni!" he cried loudly. The answering cheer brought tears to Sophy's sparkling eyes. For a moment she could not see her prince nor the men who thus took her to their hearts.

Suddenly in the midst of her exultation she saw a face on the outskirts of the throng. A small, spare man stood there, dressed in unobtrusive tweeds, but making no effort to conceal himself. He was just looking on, a stranger to the town, interested in the picturesque little scene. The face was that of Lieutenant Rastatz.

She watched the drilling of the gunners and then rode back with the prince, escorted beyond the gates by a cheering throng, which had now been joined by many stout men. Dusk was falling, and the old gray city took on a ghostly look. The glory of the sunshine had departed. Sophy shivered a little beneath her furs.

"Monseigneur, did you see Rastatz?" she asked.

"No; I didn't see him, but I knew he was here. Lukovitch told me yesterday."

"And not in uniform?"

"He has leave, no doubt, and his uniform wouldn't make his stay in Volseni any more pleasant."

"What's he there for?" she asked fretfully.

"Ah, baroness, you must inquire of those who sent him, I think." His tone was light and merry.

"To spy on you, I suppose! I hate his being there. He—he isn't worthy to be in 'dar Volseni'."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Having bet \$500 that he had seen 1000 snakes in one day near Martinsburg, Ark., Michael Kelly, a drummer, won the wager when he took the committee to a big cave filled with reptiles.

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